

Cornwall innovation project

NHS 10-year plan shift: sickness to prevention

Problem

There are around 55,000 unpaid carers in Cornwall, with only about 10,000 accessing some form of support from the council or its commissioned services. Without the right support, unpaid carers can become completely overwhelmed and reach burnout, which also affects the care they provide for their loved ones. With 68% of unpaid carers in the UK unable to get a break from their caring role when needed (Carers Trust 2023), the need for access to high-quality breaks for carers is evident.

Innovation

Working with provider Carefree, Cornwall are giving local carers access to overnight breaks in vacant hotel rooms in the surrounding areas. This provides the flexibility carers need to take some time away from their caring responsibilities, preventing burnout and increasing the sustainability of community care. As carers sign up to benefit from the scheme, the local authority has also been able to identify more carers, increasing their ability to signpost to local support services and information.

"The fact that this system is in place gives me hope and validates my experience of being an unpaid carer. It made me feel valued. It made me feel lucky. Thank you so, so much."

Janey, unpaid carer in Cornwall



Project overview

Cornwall has been redesigning their approach to co-production over the past two years, creating a robust framework that embeds lived experience across adult social care. Contributors are paid for their time and treated as equal partners in shaping services. The co-production steering group approves every service or proposal before it is commissioned.

When the Accelerating Reform Fund (ARF) was announced, the local authority moved quickly to gather ideas with teams across the council and key stakeholders such as carers' services, disability groups and voluntary sector partners, proposing a selection of potential projects. These were reviewed through a light-touch appraisal process, with input from the co-production steering group to help shape the final decision.

"The ARF is extra funding that wasn't earmarked, so we had the chance to do something innovative, and invest in something that we might not typically have been able to take a chance on so easily."

Antony Bell-Thorn, Strategic Commissioner, Cornwall County Council

Carefree's offering of giving unpaid carers access to overnight breaks in empty hotel rooms was selected – allowing carers a chance to rest and have a break, returning to their role with more energy at no extra cost to the public purse. Carers pay a reduced fee of £33 a night for their hotel break, which covers Carefree's costs.

"This is about creating an overnight aspect, so carers can have that social connection, a proper break, a good night's sleep. Just being able to live their own life for 24 hours. People really underestimate how transformative that is in terms of mental wellbeing – it may be their first break in years."

Charlotte Newman, Chief Executive Officer, Carefree

When analysing early data, a disparity between the demographics of carers registering for Carefree and those identified through existing use of support services was noticed. There are many reasons carers may not engage with more formal services, such as perceived stigma, trust and past experiences, or lack of awareness. As Carefree was marketing the scheme via their own channels, more young carers, parent carers and carers who might not typically engage with the local authority were reached.

This led to the development of a 'hidden carer pathway', working with Carefree to support self-referred carers (those who sign up via the platform directly) by allowing their details to be shared with other council services. This importantly is expanding reach to a more diverse range of carers, increasing access to local support services and strengthening community links.

Key project activity

- Engagement and outreach activity to encourage more hotels in Cornwall to donate rooms to Carefree
- Launch of a targeted social media campaign to increase carer sign-up
- Support for community partners to actively refer carers to the scheme via a training offer to local organisations, raising awareness of Carefree and its benefits
- Introduction of a 'refer a friend' discount model to incentivise community referrals
- Development of the 'hidden carer pathway' – a new service that Carefree will offer to other local areas

Emerging learnings and insights

- The flexibility of non-ringfenced funding makes room for innovation.
- Data should be analysed to fuel iterative design.
- Digital platforms can unlock engagement and increase carer identification.
- Use of channels and partners that are separate to the local authority can reach unidentified carers.



Emerging impact

"I can't express how wonderful it was to only have to think about my own needs for a couple of days, and have a lie-in for the first time in over a year. I feel refreshed."

Helena, unpaid carer in Cornwall

Since the project has launched, carers in Cornwall have taken 123 overnight breaks, with a value equivalent to around £22,000. When surveyed, 95% said their wellbeing improved following their break, and 89% said their ability to cope with their caring responsibilities improved.

The introduction of the hidden carer pathway has seen 66 self-referred carers now successfully connected to the Cornwall Carers Service and receiving extra support.

